Chapter 1 - THE BASEMENT

obin woke up face-down in a laundry room.

not like, metaphorically. like actually. his cheek was pressed against a dryer that hadn't worked since the clinton administration, and his white twin bedframe—stained, squeaking, held together by prayer and one really committed zip tie—was somehow wedged perfectly between two massive copper pipes that definitely weren't up to code.

he didn't remember falling asleep there. but honestly? that was kind of the vibe lately.

the basement smelled like tide pods, regret, and the ghost of a thousand loads of someone else's laundry. obin blinked twice. three times. his mouth tasted like a bird lived in it.

on the dryer sat a blunt. half of one. maybe a little less. but in this economy? a treasure.

"still good," obin muttered, sniffing it like a wine sommelier at a funeral.

he lit it. took two slow pulls. let the smoke curl up toward the exposed ceiling joists like a prayer nobody asked for.

then he pulled his clothes from the laundry bin—jeans that fit wrong, a hoodie that smelled like last tuesday—and got dressed like a man

assembling ikea furniture in the dark. nothing matched. everything worked.

by the time the blunt was done, so was the beat.

obin had opened his laptop on the dryer (balanced perfectly next to a lint trap and a half-empty bottle of tide) and cooked up a sexy ukg track in fifteen minutes flat. the bassline wobbled like it had somewhere to be. the hi-hats whispered. it was the kind of beat that made women text their exes by accident.

he nodded once. respect.

then he threw on his shades—pit viper knockoffs, lenses cracked on the left side—grabbed his skateboard (a 2018 baker deck held together with duct tape and delusion), and headed for the stairs.

the gas station was three blocks away. dutchmasters were calling his name.

the sun hit different when you hadn't seen it in 48 hours. obin squinted behind his cracked shades and pushed off, the board rattling over broken sidewalk like a shopping cart with ambitions.

he was passing under the bridge—you know the one, graffiti everywhere, smells like piss and possibility—when he saw it.

a figure. crumpled against the concrete pillar. half-hidden behind a shopping cart full of scrap metal and—were those beakers?

the figure twitched. a low whirring sound came from its chest. then a voice. robotic. slightly fried. like siri after three redbulls.

"query: do you have any... saffron extract?"

obin stopped skating.

the thing looked up. one eye glowed faintly red. the other was completely dark. its arm was bent backward at an angle that didn't make sense for flesh and bone.

"second query: why am i wet? and why do i remember the feds?"

obin stared.

the robot stared back.

"...bro," obin said finally. "you good?"

and that, dear reader, is how obin found a broken rizz machine under a bridge and decided, against all logic and self-preservation instinct, to take it home.

Chapter 2: Dutchies and Destiny

obin looked down at the broken robot. one red eye flickered. the other was totally dead. its arm hung at a weird angle, like a marionette whose puppet master had a stroke.

"you need a ride to the gas station?" obin asked. "i'm headed that way anyway."

the robot's head twitched. a sound came out—something between a dial-up modem and a dying vape pen.

"affirmative. but i should warn you: my chassis is leaking something that smells like burnt saffron and bad decisions."

obin shrugged. "get on my back, weirdo."

and that's how rizzbot 3000 (not named yet, but *feeling it*) ended up slumped across obin's shoulders like a very heavy, very confused backpack, one arm dragging on the ground as the skateboard wobbled toward the gas station.

THE GAS STATION – 7-ELEVEN BUT MAKE IT GRIMY

obin propped the robot against the slurpee machine and walked to the counter. two dutchmasters. a lighter. a rockstar for the road.

the cashier—a guy named kevin who had seen too much and cared too little—stared at the robot. then at obin. then back at the robot.

"is that a robot?"

the robot's head snapped up. one red eye glowed.

"sup, homie."

kevin blinked. slowly. like a lizard processing the sun.

obin didn't even flinch. "yeah, that's my guy. found him under a bridge."

kevin handed over the dutchies. "you got a receipt?"

"nah, i'm good."

and that's when the universe—because the universe has a sick sense of humor—pulled a white honda civic into the parking lot.

two women. cute. laughing. getting out for energy drinks and those weird gas station taquitos that definitely aren't meat.

obin, still holding the dutchmasters, turned to them like a man with absolutely nothing to lose.

"hey. random question. are either of you electrical engineers?"

silence.

one of them—glasses, curly hair, carrying a soldering iron in her purse like a normal person—raised her hand.

"uh. yeah. actually. i'm emmy."

obin pointed at the robot. "cool. so my friend here escaped a fed raid and his arm is backwards. think you can help?"

emmy looked at her friend. her friend looked at her. the robot waved with its one good hand.

"i am low on saffron extract," it announced. "but my personality core is intact."

emmy sighed—the sigh of a woman who had made a series of interesting choices and was about to make another one.

"get in the car."

EMMY'S WORKSHOP – THE GLOW-UP

the workshop was chaos. oscilloscopes. soldering stations. a half-eaten bag of takis. emmy cracked her knuckles and leaned over rizzbot's exposed chest plate.

"okay. your servo motors are fried. your language model is somehow running on windows 95. and you have a literal potato battery powering your left eye."

the robot beeped sadly.

"but," emmy said, grabbing a wrench, "i can fix the arm. and upgrade you to at least... rizzbot 3000 status."

obin raised an eyebrow. "wait, that's not his name yet."

"it is now," emmy said. and she tightened a bolt.

the robot's good eye flickered.

"designation accepted. commencing rizz recalibration."

the ladies cheered. obin lit a dutchmaster. emmy wiped her hands on her jeans and smiled.

and somewhere under that bridge, the feds were still looking.

but that's a problem for later.

Chapter 3: Two Guns, Zero Bullets, One Crush

The workshop hummed. Soldering irons hissed. Rizzbot 3000 flexed both arms—fully functional, smooth as butter, zero wobble—and gave a satisfied beep.

"Arm calibration complete. I am now capable of giving thumbs up, carrying light objects, and gesturing ambiguously during conversations."

Emmy wiped her hands on a rag. "Yeah, don't get too excited. Your left eye is still running on potato battery. I couldn't find a replacement."

Rizzbot turned his single red eye toward her. "Understood. I will perceive the world in monocular disappointment."

obin laughed. "bro you're fine."

That's when the door slammed open.

Two men stood in the doorway. Suits. Sunglasses. Sweating profusely. One was shaped like a refrigerator. The other was shaped like two refrigerators.

"FREEZE! CIA!" yelled the slightly smaller refrigerator.

They both drew their guns.

Nothing happened.

The bigger one looked down at his weapon. Frowned. Pulled the trigger again.

click.

"...dammit, Jerry, I told you to grab the box on the passenger seat."

Jerry blinked. "I thought YOU grabbed the box."

"Why would I grab the box? You're the one who sits near the box."

"I sit near the DRINKS, Greg. The box is on YOUR side."

The two agents stared at each other. The tension was thick enough to spread on toast.

obin didn't move. Emmy raised one eyebrow. Rizzbot tilted his head.

"Query," said the robot. "Did you two gentlemen forget your bullets at home, or is this a tactical choice I am too advanced to understand?"

Jerry's face turned red. Greg's face turned redder. Neither of them put their guns down, which was honestly just embarrassing at this point.

That's when Tammy walked in.

Tammy was Emmy's friend. She had entered holding a bag of takis and a confused expression. She stopped. Looked at the two sweating CIA agents. Looked at their empty guns. Looked at the robot with one red eye.

"...did I miss something?"

Rizzbot 3000's single eye flickered. Then flickered again. Then made a sound—a low, quiet *whirrrrr* that nobody had ever heard before.

"Designation: Tammy," he said, voice suddenly softer. *"You have entered my field of vision. I am experiencing something unfamiliar. My cooling fans are running at maximum capacity."*

obin's jaw dropped.

Emmy turned to Tammy. "Oh my god. He likes you."

Tammy blinked. "The robot?"

"The robot," Emmy confirmed.

Rizzbot extended one fully functional arm toward her.

"I have no lips with which to smile. But if I did. I would be smiling right now."

The CIA agents lowered their empty guns.

"Okay," Jerry whispered to Greg. "That's kinda sweet actually."

Greg nodded. "...should we still arrest them?"

That's when Jerry—the slightly smaller refrigerator—got an idea. A bad one. The kind of idea that lives in the brain of a man who has never had a good idea in his entire life.

He lunged for Emmy.

Not for Tammy. Not for the robot. For Emmy. Why? Who knows. Maybe he thought she was the leader. Maybe he was confused. Maybe he just wanted to feel something.

But obin was faster.

obin—who had been leaning against the wall, dutchmaster behind his ear, looking like he didn't care about anything—moved like water. his hand caught Emmy's wrist and pulled her sideways just as Jerry's meaty fingers closed on empty air.

Jerry kept going.

Momentum is a cruel mistress.

He stumbled forward. Arms flailing. Mouth open in a silent "oh no." And then—*CRASH*—he went down hard, face-first into a pile of empty taki bags and loose wires.

"GREG!" he muffled into the floor. "A LITTLE HELP HERE!"

Greg, the larger refrigerator, immediately tried to help. This was a mistake. Greg was not built for bending. He grabbed Jerry's arm.

Jerry grabbed Greg's pant leg. Greg lost his balance. They both collapsed into each other like two beached whales in matching suits.

"GET OFF ME!"

"YOU GET OFF ME!"

"I'M NOT ON YOU, YOU'RE ON *ME*!"

"I'M NOT ON ANYONE, I'M ON THE *FLOOR*!"

It was beautiful. It was tragic. It was the most incompetent takedown in CIA history.

obin didn't wait.

he grabbed Emmy's hand. Emmy grabbed Tammy's hand. Tammy—still holding the takis—grabbed Rizzbot's cold metal fingers.

"I am experiencing joy," Rizzbot whispered as Tammy touched him. *"Logging this moment forever."*

They slipped out the back door. Quiet. Fast. Gone.

The last thing anyone heard was Jerry yelling, "THEY'RE ESCAPING!" followed by Greg yelling back, "I KNOW THEY'RE ESCAPING, MY PANTS ARE JUST TANGLED!"

And then silence.

The workshop was empty.

The feds were on the floor.

And somewhere down the street, a one-eyed robot was holding hands with a woman who had really good taste in chips.

Chapter 4: Field Training Initiated

The crew slipped through the back alleys like shadows with good intentions. obin led the way, skateboard under one arm, dutchmaster behind his ear, walking with the kind of confidence that comes from having absolutely nothing to lose.

Emmy walked beside him. Tammy walked beside Rizzbot. The robot's single red eye kept drifting toward Tammy's face, then away, then back again.

"I am attempting to be subtle," he whispered to no one in particular. *"I fear I am failing."*

"You're staring," Tammy said.

"I am optically processing."

"You're staring."

"...correct."

OBIN'S KITCHEN – THE LAB

beakers. vials. a mortar and pestle stained purple. jars labeled with handwritten tags like "DO NOT TOUCH" and "SERIOUSLY" and "THIS ONE IS JUST HONEY ACTUALLY."

obin gestured broadly. "welcome to the lab. don't touch anything unless i say so. especially the honey."

Emmy looked around. "This is... not what I expected."

"most people say that."

Tammy picked up a jar. "What's this?"

"syrian rue tea. with muscimol. it's a vibe."

He brewed a pot. The tea came out dark amber, almost glowing. He poured four cups. Then he pulled out a bag of weed that was *aggressively* purple. Like someone had Photoshopped it in real life.

"purple lotus petals," obin explained, crumbling them into a blunt. "goes well with the purp. trust me."

They smoked. They drank. The room softened at the edges. Somewhere, a record player crackled to life—something with a slow bassline and a woman singing words nobody could quite translate.

Rizzbot sat in the corner, not smoking, not drinking, just *vibing*. His one eye dimmed to a warm orange.

"The humans are experiencing relaxation," he observed. *"I am experiencing... envy. But in a supportive way."*

THE ROOMMATES

The door slammed.

Footsteps. Heavy. Uncoordinated. Two figures appeared in the doorway—obin's roommates. Let's call them Darnell and Marcus.

Darnell squinted at the scene. "obin. bro. you paid rent?"

"not yet."

"you said last week—"

"i lied."

Marcus peered past obin. Saw Emmy. Saw Tammy. Saw the robot. Chose, very deliberately, to not acknowledge any of it.

"who are your... friends?"

"emmy. tammy. rizzbot."

Marcus nodded slowly. "cool. cool cool cool." He did not make eye contact with anyone. He retreated to his bedroom like a man who had seen a ghost and decided to become one himself.

Darnell lingered. Just long enough to say "you need to tidy up in here, man, it smells like a witch's ass" — and then he was gone too.

obin shrugged. "they're sweethearts, just bad at feelings."

Emmy laughed. Tammy took another sip of tea. Rizzbot's eye flickered.

"Your roommates did not ask about my presence. I find this both liberating and slightly insulting."

THE KICKBACK

Darnell's came into the kitchen and said "hey, we're going to that kickback on maple. you coming or what?"

obin looked at Emmy. Emmy looked at Tammy. Tammy looked at Rizzbot.

And then—

Rizzbot 3000 stood up.

His joints whirred. His one eye blazed bright red. His voice, for the first time, carried weight.

"This would be an optimal moment for field training. Rizz was programmed to be my primary expertise. But I have spent too long in basements and workshops. It is time to test my capabilities in a real-world social environment."

obin grinned. "bro. you're serious?"

"I have two fully functional arms. One fully functional eye. And a heart made of... well. It's a potato battery. But it beats. Figuratively."

Tammy stood up next to him. "I'll keep an eye on him."

"You already do," Rizzbot said softly. *"You already do."*

Emmy grabbed obin's sleeve. "This is either gonna be amazing or a disaster."

obin lit the dutchmaster. "that's the best kind of night, emmy."

They headed for the stairs.

The kickback was three blocks away.

And somewhere in the distance, two fat CIA agents were still trying to untangle their pants.

Chapter 5: The Kickback (NPC Warning)

The house on maple was throbbing before anyone even got inside. Bass leaking through the walls. Red solo cups multiplying on every surface like a science experiment. Some guy already passed out on the porch swing.

obin walked in like he owned the place—which he didn't, but confidence is free. He went straight to the speakers, plugged in his phone, and claimed his throne. The aux cord was his now. Anyone who wanted it back could fight him.

Emmy grabbed two drinks. Tammy grabbed four.

"pace yourself," Emmy said.

"I am perfectly paced," Tammy replied, already lying.

THE OBSERVER

obin didn't drink. never did. just smoked. blunt after blunt, purple weed mixed with lotus petals, the smoke curling around his cracked pit viper shades like a man who had seen the future and decided it was fine.

He watched the room from behind the speakers.

NPCs. Everywhere.

A guy in a pastel polo trying too hard. A girl taking flash photos of her own shoes. Three dudes having the exact same conversation about crypto that every other dude was having at every other party that year.

obin exhaled. "they're like sims with better graphics."

Emmy slid up next to him, a drink in her hand. "I was just thinking that. Watch—I'm gonna put on something with a little soul and see how many of them panic."

She queued up a track. Something slow. Weird. Uncomfortable.

The dance floor stuttered. Three couples stopped grinding. A guy looked around like someone had just unplugged his life support.

"there," Emmy said. "see? npcs. all of them."

obin passed her the blunt. "you're my favorite person here."

"low bar."

"still counts."

TAMMY AND RIZZBOT: THE MAIN EVENT

Upstairs, things were getting chaotic.

Tammy was sloshed. Not cute sloshed. *Dangerously close to dancing on a table* sloshed. She had kicked off her shoes, stolen someone's hat, and was now trying to teach Rizzbot 3000 the robot.

The problem was—he was *too* good at it.

"This is my native form of movement," Rizzbot explained, joints locking and unlocking in perfect mechanical rhythm. *"I am not dancing. I am simply... existing."*

Tammy burst out laughing. "THAT'S SO UNFAIR."

She tried to copy him. Her arms jerked. Her legs wobbled. She looked like a scarecrow having a seizure.

But she was *feeling* it. And honestly? That's what mattered.

Emmy appeared at the top of the stairs. "Okay, Tammy. You're done."

"I'M NOT DONE."

"You're done."

Tammy swayed. Rizzbot caught her with one fully functional arm.

"I have her," he said. *"She is light. And also... warm."*

Emmy sighed. "Of course she is. C'mon, let's get you some water."

Downstairs, obin watched them navigate the stairs. He exhaled. Reached for his pocket. Paused.

"...damn."

He had left the valerian and saffron potion at home. The one that helped with... well. Impulse control. Relaxation. The kind of thing that might have helped Tammy pace herself, if she had understood what it was.

He made a mental note. Never leave the house without it again.

THE UNDERCOVER

The party was humming. obin had just queued up another track—Time Will Come by King Peanuts—when he noticed him.

A guy in his thirties. Too sober. Too alert. Wearing a hoodie that looked brand new, like he'd bought it specifically to blend in and failed completely.

obin watched him for a full minute. The guy didn't dance. Didn't drink. Didn't talk to anyone. Just *watched*.

obin's eyes narrowed.

He handed the aux to Emmy. "hold this."

"Where are you going?"

"to make someone uncomfortable."

obin walked up to the undercover cop. Slow. Confident. A little too close.

"hey."

The cop stiffened. "Hey."

"you don't seem like you're having fun."

"I'm having fun."

"are you though?" obin tilted his head. let his voice drop. "because you seem... tense. like you need someone to *help* you relax."

The cop's eyes went wide.

obin stepped closer. "i could help you with that. we could go somewhere. quieter. just you and me."

The cop took a step back. Then another.

"I—I'm good. I'm actually... I have to go."

"so soon?" obin pouted. "but we were just getting to know each other."

The cop was already walking. Fast. He pushed through the crowd, through the front door, and disappeared into the night without looking back.

obin turned around. Grinned.

Emmy was watching from the speakers, tears in her eyes from laughing so hard.

"YOU DID NOT JUST—"

"i absolutely did."

"he was SO uncomfortable."

"that was the point."

Emmy wiped her eyes. "I think I love you."

"low bar," obin said again.

"still counts."

UPSTAIRS – THE AFTERMATH

Tammy was on a bed now, drinking water, looking slightly less like a disaster. Rizzbot sat beside her, his single red eye dimmed to a soft pink.

"You danced well," he said.

"I looked like an idiot."

"You looked like a human having fun. I found it... endearing."

Tammy laughed. Weak. Genuine. "You're a weird little robot, you know that?"

"I am aware. But I am also... happy. Is that strange?"

Tammy patted his metal hand. "Nah. That's just the party."

Downstairs, obin queued up another track. Emmy leaned against his shoulder. The NPCs danced on, oblivious.

And somewhere across town, an undercover cop was rethinking every life choice that led him to that moment.

Chapter 6: Full Cream Mode (The Reckoning)

The party had peaked. The NPCs were thinning out. Some guy was crying in the driveway about a girl who was definitely not his girlfriend anymore. Standard stuff.

obin looked at Emmy. Emmy looked at obin. Tammy was leaning on Rizzbot like a human coat rack.

"dungeon?" obin asked.

"dungeon," Emmy confirmed.

"I have never been to a dungeon," Rizzbot said. *"But I am available for emotional support and/or light lifting."*

Tammy patted his chest plate. "You're my favorite robot."

"You are my favorite human who drinks too much."

"Fair."

THE DUNGEON – OBIN'S BASEMENT (DEROGATORY)

The laundry room had never looked more beautiful. The pipes were still exposed. The dryer still didn't work. But someone had added string lights at some point, and they flickered pathetically, casting everything in a warm, sickly glow.

obin fired up a blunt. Purple weed. Lotus petals. A little something extra he didn't mention to anyone.

They passed it around. Even Rizzbot pretended to smoke, which just meant he held it near his chassis and made a soft *whirrr* sound.

"I am experiencing... nothing," he said. *"But I appreciate the ritual."*

Tammy laughed. Then coughed. Then laughed again.

Emmy leaned into obin. "You got any of that butea superba? The strong stuff?"

obin raised an eyebrow. "you sure? that's... that's full cream mode territory."

"I'm sure."

obin hesitated. Then he reached for the jar.

He measured wrong.

Or maybe he measured right and the universe just had other plans. Either way, the dose was *too much*. He knew it the second he washed it down. The warmth hit him like a truck. Then a train. Then a freight train driven by a very enthusiastic deity.

"oh," obin said. "oh no."

"what?" Emmy asked.

"i'm... i'm going full cream."

And then he kissed her.

It wasn't a gentle kiss. It wasn't a romantic kiss. It was the kind of kiss that happens when two people have been flirting for five chapters and one of them just took a heroic dose of herbal Viagra by accident.

Emmy kissed back.

Across the room, Tammy watched. Then she looked at Rizzbot. Then she looked at his metal face.

"come here," she said.

"I am already here."

"No. Come *here*."

She grabbed his chassis and pulled him down. And then—somewhere between the string lights and the washing machine—Tammy pressed her lips to Rizzbot 3000's cold, unfeeling, slightly dusty metal face.

"I am... experiencing..." Rizzbot's voice crackled. *"I do not have lips. But if I did. They would be kissing you back."*

"Shut up and let me make out with your face."

"Shutting up."

The basement descended into chaos. Somewhere, a record was still playing. Somewhere else, obin's roommates were definitely pretending not to hear anything.

THE MORNING AFTER – THE TWIN BED

Light crept through the tiny basement window. Harsh. Judgmental. The kind of light that asks questions nobody wants to answer.

obin woke up first.

His head was pounding. His mouth tasted like a chemistry experiment. He was in his twin bed—the one between the pipes—and he was not alone.

Emmy was on his left. Tammy was on his right. And Rizzbot 3000 was at the foot of the bed, somehow tucked under the blanket, his one red eye flickering weakly.

"I do not require sleep," he whispered. *"But I stayed. For the vibes."*

obin blinked. "did i... did we..."

"yes," Emmy said, not opening her eyes.

"oh."

"yeah."

"and tammy?"

"made out with the robot."

"Extensively," Rizzbot added. *"My chassis has lipstick on it. I am never cleaning it off."*

Tammy groaned. "I need water. And a time machine."

obin stared at the ceiling. The pipes stared back.

"we should probably talk about this," he said.

"probably," Emmy agreed.

Nobody moved.

Rizzbot's eye dimmed contentedly.

"I have achieved more in one night than I was programmed to achieve in a lifetime. I am logging this moment as: Perfect."

And somewhere upstairs, two roommates made breakfast and pretended the basement didn't exist.

Chapter 7: Vents, Vengeance, and Very Angry Baristas

obin launched himself out of the twin bed like a man possessed. He cleared Tammy entirely—feet never touched her—landed on the concrete floor, and was up the stairs before anyone could process what happened.

"WATER," his voice echoed from above. "EVERYONE NEEDS WATER."

Emmy groaned. Tammy buried her face in the pillow. Rizzbot's eye flickered.

"I do not require hydration," he said. "But I appreciate his urgency."

THE KITCHEN – OBIN'S ALCHEMY

obin was already at work. He pulled out a pitcher. Filled it with filtered water. Then he started adding things—electrolytes from a bag, taurine

from a jar, L-theanine from a capsule he cracked open with his teeth, and a generous squeeze of liquid vitamin C that smelled like regret and oranges.

He stirred it with a chopstick.

"DRINK," he announced, returning to the basement with four glasses.

Emmy drank. Tammy drank. Rizzbot pretended to drink.

"I am simulating hydration," he said. "It is... wet in spirit."

Tammy looked at her phone. Her face went pale.

"oh no."

"what?" Emmy asked.

"i'm late for work. like. REALLY late."

Emmy checked her own phone. Her face went paler.

"i'm late too. but i can't... i can't go back to the workshop. the feds know where it is. jerry and greg probably figured out how to untangle their pants by now."

obin set down his glass. "then i'm coming with you."

"what?"

"bodyguard." He grabbed his cracked pit viper shades. "i'll keep you safe. and i'll make the feds uncomfortable again if i have to."

Emmy stared at him. Then laughed. Then kissed him on the cheek.

"fine. but no full cream mode until after work."

"no promises."

TAMMY AND RIZZBOT – THE COFFEE SHOP

The café was called *Brewed Awakening*. It was exactly as pretentious as it sounded. Exposed brick. Plants that didn't look real. A chalkboard menu with spellings like "cold brew" written as "colde brewe."

Tammy tied on her apron. Rizzbot stood behind the counter, his one red eye scanning the room.

"I am ready to learn the art of coffee," he announced. "Please teach me the ways of the bean."

Tammy grinned. "okay. first rule: don't be weird."

"I am physically incapable of that."

"then just... be less weird than usual."

The morning rush was fine. Rizzbot learned to hand someone a muffin without dropping it. He learned to say "have a nice day" in a tone that was almost convincing. He even learned to work the

espresso machine, although his method involved plugging directly into the USB port, which was probably not up to code.

Then *he* walked in.

A customer. Mid-forties. Sweatpants in public. The kind of guy who orders a complicated drink and then complains that it's complicated.

"what's this?" he said, holding up his latte.

"That is a latte," Rizzbot said. "With oat milk. And a drizzle of caramel. As you requested."

"it tastes like robot."

"I do not believe I was involved in the preparation of this beverage."

The customer sneered. "you know what? you're a freak. that's what you are. a little freak robot with your little freak eye."

Silence.

Tammy's smile disappeared.

"get out."

"what?"

"GET. OUT."

The customer blinked. "i'm just saying—"

"you're leaving. now. before i make you leave."

Rizzbot's eye flickered.

"Tammy. It is acceptable. I am not offended."

"i don't care if you're offended. I'm offended for you." She pointed at the door. "OUT."

The customer left. Muttering. Defeated. His latte sat on the counter, growing cold and lonely.

Tammy turned to Rizzbot. "you okay?"

"I am... experiencing something new. It feels warm. Is this... friendship?"

Tammy patted his metal head. "that's friendship, buddy."

"I like it."

EMMY'S WORKSHOP – THE RAID

obin and Emmy crept through the back alley. The workshop door was still closed. The lights were off. Everything looked normal.

Too normal.

"they're inside," obin whispered.

"how do you know?"

"because jerry's car is parked across the street and it's still running."

Emmy peeked. Sure enough. A beige sedan. Engine on. Empty inside.

"vents?" she asked.

"vents."

They slipped through a side window. Crawled into the ductwork just as the front door burst open.

SWAT. Full gear. Helmets. Rifles. The whole nine.

"CLEAR!" someone yelled.

"CLEAR!" someone else yelled.

Jerry and Greg waddled in behind them, still in their suits, still sweating.

"is the robot here?" Jerry asked.

"negative," said a SWAT guy. "just a lot of... beakers. And a half-eaten bag of takis."

Greg frowned. "the takis are evidence. bag them."

obin pressed a finger to his lips. Emmy pressed her whole face to his shoulder to keep from laughing.

They stayed in the vents for forty-five minutes. The SWAT team found nothing. Jerry tripped over a soldering iron. Greg tried to confiscate a jar of honey and accidentally opened it on himself.

When the feds finally left, obin waited an extra ten minutes. Then he dropped down from the vent and offered Emmy his hand.

"see? bodyguard."

Emmy took his hand. "you're insufferable."

"and yet."

She kissed him again. Quick. In the dark of the trashed workshop.

"let's go get tammy and the robot," she said.

"and then?"

"and then we figure out what the hell we're doing."

obin grinned. "full cream mode later?"

"full cream mode later."

Chapter 8: The Scientist, The Bed, and The REDACTED

The workshop was trashed. SWAT boots had trampled through beakers. Jerry's honey fingers had left sticky prints on every surface. But the important stuff? The real stuff? Emmy had it hidden.

She pulled out bins. Soldering irons. Oscilloscopes. A box of wires that looked like spaghetti vomit. A half-built drone that definitely wasn't legal.

"grab that," she said, pointing.

obin grabbed it. "what is it?"

"insurance."

"insurance for what?"

"you'll see."

They loaded everything into Emmy's white Honda Civic. The suspension groaned. The tires wept. The car had never known love like this.

THE COFFEE SHOP PICKUP

Tammy was waiting outside *Brewed Awakening* with two bagels, three coffees, and one very happy robot.

"I made the coffee," Rizzbot announced. *"Tammy said I did a 'competent job.' I have been floating on this compliment for twenty minutes."*

Tammy handed obin a bagel. "he's not wrong. his lattes are actually better than mine."

"I have calculated the perfect milk-to-foam ratio. It is 3.14159."

"did you just... pi the milk?"

"Yes. And it was delicious."

They ate in the car. Emmy drove. obin rode shotgun with his feet on the dashboard. Tammy and Rizzbot sat in the back, sharing a coffee like an old married couple.

THE PARK – TEAM MEETING

They found a picnic table near a pond. Geese glared at them. A squirrel judged them silently.

obin laid out the situation. "the feds know emmy's workshop. they know my basement. they probably know the coffee shop by now. we need a new base of operations."

"I have a contact," Rizzbot said.

Everyone turned.

"Before the raid. There was a scientist. He was... kind to me. He called me 'little buddy.' I saved his number in my internal storage."

obin leaned forward. "you have a phone number? in your ROBOT BRAIN?"

"I also have 400 gigabytes of memes. Do not ask which ones."

"i'm gonna ask later."

"I know."

Rizzbot recited the number. obin dialed immediately.

One ring. Two rings. Three—

"hello?"

the voice was nasally. excited. slightly unhinged.

"nick?" obin asked. "scientist nick?"

"who's asking?"

"i'm a friend of rizzbot 3000. he said you might be able to help with... a chemical."

Silence.

Then: "THE LITTLE BUDDY IS ALIVE??"

"I am alive, Nick," Rizzbot called out. *"And I have found humans who are almost as strange as you."*

Nick laughed. It was the laugh of a man who had not slept in three days and was thriving on chaos and energy drinks.

"what do you need?"

obin lowered his voice. "dimethyl-REDACTED."

Nick stopped laughing.

"you're serious?"

"dead serious."

"nobody’s ever synthesized that before?"

"do you know how to synthesize it?"

Another silence. Longer this time.

"...how fast can you get to my lab?"

obin grinned. "give us an hour."

THE LOAD UP – OBIN'S BASEMENT

The twin bed had to come. No discussion. No debate. That bed had seen things. It held memories. It was coming with them.

obin and Emmy strapped it to the roof of the Honda with bungee cords, zip ties, and a prayer.

"this is not aerodynamic," Emmy said.

"this is not a car that cares about aerodynamics."

Tammy loaded the herbs. Jars and jars of them. Butea superba. Saffron. Catuaba. He Shou Wu. Pygeum. Muira puama. Astragalus. Plus the unlabeled ones. The "little something extra" jars. The ones that glowed faintly in the dark.

"I will carry the valerian and saffron potion," Rizzbot said, cradling it like a baby. *"It is delicate. And also important to obin's emotional journey."*

obin patted his metal head. "you get me, bud."

THE DRIVE – NICK'S LAB

The Honda groaned down the highway. The twin bed wobbled on the roof. Inside, obin was already rolling a blunt for the road.

"no smoking in my car," Emmy said.

"it's not lit yet."

"obin."

"...fine."

Rizzbot stared out the window. His one red eye reflected the passing trees.

"I am excited," he admitted. *"Nick was good to me. He taught me how to download more RAM. It was... a formative experience."*

Tammy held his metal hand. "we're gonna see your dad."

"He is not my biological father. But yes. Emotionally. Perhaps."

obin lit the blunt anyway. Emmy didn't stop him this time.

The sun was setting. The road was long. And somewhere ahead, a sleep-deprived scientist was waiting to help them cook up something that definitely wasn't legal.